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ABSTRACT

This monograph looks back at the 20th century, seeking to learn about the present by learning from the past. One challenge to institutions of higher learning today is the denial of the intellectual and cultural heritage of the university as a time and place to study and learn, as a community of scholars and scientists, and as a place where knowledge is created, disseminated, and used. The essay challenges those who denounce "rote learning," noting that personal, collective, and institutional memory are essential for comprehension and understanding. The past is where we find it and what we make it. When we recall and use the past to learn about the present, we must do so on the premise that what we learn is related to how we use collective and personal memory and how we study and apply what we recall. The essay concludes that the social, cultural, and educational consequences of 20th century discoveries, inventions, and innovations provide an incentive to learn about the past, and to comprehend and use the knowledge gained. (CH)

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by Cameron Fincher

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THE 20TH CENTURY: PAST AND FUTURE

by Cameron Fincher

Academicians over fifty should be pleased to see the turn of the calendar on January 1, 2000. Each of us has outlived the life expectancy of 49 years, with which the 20th century began. Many of us living in our "second half-century" will be around for two, perhaps three, decades of the new millennium.

The passing of the 20th century, therefore, is no cause for regrets. Most of us carry our habits, attitudes, beliefs, and values with us, and the past century is an enormous part of the cultural baggage we have packed. Indeed, the 20th century—as our recent past—has a bright and promising future!

The reasons are obvious. Revolutions in information, communications, and technology bequeath to all of us a massive fortune of "history in many fascinating forms." No other 100 years has been documented so profusely in print, on film, on tape, or on diskette. The remarkable ease with which personal and public events are recorded, stored, retrieved, and distributed could make most of us historians of one kind or another.

As video cassettes prove, the children and grandchildren of veterans can now see, hear, and comprehend more of World War II than their grandparents could at the time. And as diligently as we may summarize, distill, or epitomize the events, trends, and developments of the 20th century, we should not be surprized (in 2020) when there will be total indifference to our efforts. As "time may well show"—*those of us who appraise too precisely our own time and place may amuse, but not amaze, our successors.*

The challenge to those of us in institutions of higher learning is to appreciate a simple paradox: unless we understand the recent past of our institutions, we are *unlikely* to understand their purposes, meaning, and significance as they change to meet societal demands and expectations. As we enter the 21st century, we are burdened with a host of academic disputes that does not speak well of colleagues who accept no responsibility for the consequences of their freedom to teach. With similar indifference, many students will continue to expect a maximum return from a minimal investment of their time, effort, and intellect.

Included in our academic disputes are denials of the intellectual and cultural heritage of the university as a time and place to study and learn, as a community of scholars and scientists, and as a "universe" in which knowledge is created, enhanced, disseminated, and used effectively. Academic disciplines hold no patents on the past and they no longer monopolize the methods of scholarly inquiry by which we learn to use the past more effectively. In other words, the 20th century may look quite different from our vantage points in the 21st century.

As the ethos of a new century is established, its traces on human purposes and experience will be observable. Thus, in future discussions of the 20th century as the past, at least one imperative is quite clear: we must appreciate and use more wisely the various means by which the past can be recalled. In doing so, we can agree that the past is (a) what we remember, (b) all around us, (c) where we find it, and (d) what we make it.

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THE PAST IS WHAT WE REMEMBER

A noted historian[1] has written that all human beings are conscious of the past because all of us have lived with people older than we are. In growing, learning, and maturing as individuals our personal memories are influenced by the collective memories of groups in which we are participants and by the institutional memories of organizations in which we are members. On many occasions we are reminded that our memories are selective—and *ipso facto* not always trustworthy. Unfortunately, such gems of folk wisdom make no distinctions between passively *remembering* and actively *recalling* past experiences.

Most critics of education denounce "rote memory" as a means of learning and extol the value of organized or meaningful recall. Numerous books have been written on the value of organization in storing, retaining, and retrieving personal experiences. But very few students complete their education without resorting to some kind of memory aid in recalling difficult-to-remember details. Personal, collective, and institutional memories thus are aided in various ways by the "laws of association," dating from Aristotle's principles of similarity, contrast, and contiguity, and later extended in our western intellectual tradition to include primacy, recency, frequency, vividness, and meaningfulness.[2]

In brief, the active, focused, or directed recall of persons, places, and events in the 20th century can be assisted in many ways. The collective memories of organized groups and the formal memories of institutions often facilitate recall of "forgotten" incidents, decisions, events, trends, and colleagues. *Indeed, our perceptions of change are undoubtedly influenced by our memories of the past—and without such memories, we lose much of the continuity in our personal and professional lives.* Much to our advantage and pleasure, communications technology now makes possible the search for and the recovery of data, information, and knowledge that were inaccessible until quite recently.

Personal, collective, and institutional memory—with all respective faults and limitations—are no less essential to our comprehension and understanding of the present than the best of books in history, philosophy, and literature. No one contends that human memories are accurate in all details, but the stimulated recall of past perceptions, observations, and experiences is a remarkable cognitive resource in the attainment of knowledge, competence, and understanding. At one time or another, all of us have been amazed at what can be recalled in situations where conditions are conducive to "remembering the past." In the months and years ahead, there will be many interesting reminders of 20th century events—and in our personal, collective, and institutional memories there is much to be reconsidered.

THE PAST IS ALL AROUND US

If the greater portion of "learning about the past" is a function of reading or listening, remembering, and then recalling what was read or said—there is much yet to be attained in "learning by observation." All of us live in an environment in which our sensations and perceptions are increasingly complex. In many situations we are literally bombarded with sights and sounds that seek our attention. And to no minor extent, *many of us have been conditioned by the news and entertainment media "to pass time" in places where sights and sounds are intensified and continuously changing.* We take for granted the many changing sights and sounds in our natural environment, in our homes and communities, and in our workplaces.

Many changes in our physical environment occur naturally and gradually—with little noticeable difference in the span of days and weeks. When the environment is changed for better or worse—by human actions, we notice more quickly and we approve or disapprove according to our memories of previous appearances. With time to reflect upon our appraisal, we may alter not only our memories, but our

perceptions of what has taken the place of what we remember. In time, as we so often say, we will become inured to the change we have observed—and think no more about our past judgment.

Changes in society and culture are more subtle, and we may adopt changes in our daily routines as neighbors and colleagues adopt changes in theirs. *Our passive acceptance of cultural change can be altered rapidly when we recall how our society or culture changed to serve purposes detrimental to human welfare*—and without consultation with those affected by particular changes. At such times, our understanding of the past directs attention to mistakes made in the recent past. In such ways minor mistakes of the recent past become disdainful—especially when we are told that the mistakes were made to restore a more distant past regarded as more relevant.

In the early years of a new century there will be much to learn about the 20th century by observing the efforts made to amend, modify, reverse, rewrite, and revise various problems and conflicts ineptly handled during the 1990s. From national elections to neighborhood gossip there will be many references to the past century reflecting past perceptions, memories, and decisions. From these—observant participants can learn much that is indicative of the changing times.

THE PAST IS WHERE WE FIND IT

The 20th century does indeed leave behind much to be discovered, analyzed and interpreted, reexamined, and reappraised—and there is virtually no end to the questions left unanswered. The exploration of ocean floors for ships lost at sea is but one dramatic example of the possibilities created by technological ingenuity. The fascinating discovery of the *Titanic* dispelled many conjectures about what might be found when the ship could be located, explored, and possibly raised (as the *Andrea Doria* was). Even more astounding, perhaps, is the discovery of the German Battleship *Bismarck* in the South Atlantic, the exploration and photographing of the Cruiser *Atlanta* and other ships sunk in the Battle of Guadalcanal Sea, and the more recent location of the Carrier *Yorktown* at the Battle of Midway.

The discovery of new archeological artifacts in the Mediterranean is almost a daily event, and the continuing location of 16th century Spanish Galleons in the Caribbean has given a new meaning to the phrase "mining the ocean floor." Other opportunities to explore, rediscover, and "mine" the 20th century will be found wherever individual, group, and institutional decisions and actions have left verifiable records of significant, crucial, or revelatory events. And as commemoration of WWII's 50th anniversary has again demonstrated, there is still much to learn from letters, diaries, photos, and other mementos long stored in *our* attics and basements.

In brief, the past is to be found wherever new implications concerning historically significant events can be drawn and corroborated with findings from other sources. The discovery of documents, private or public, can often lead to re-examination and revisions of assumptions, conclusions, and implications once believed to be "carved in stone." *In many respects, the search for and the study of past events begins with incidental (or tangential) discoveries when one finding takes precedence over another and then leads to other—more significant but previously unexpected—findings.* Many assumptions once taken for granted can lead to entirely different conclusions and implications—when re-examined from another perspective and supported with convincing evidence.

THE PAST IS WHAT WE MAKE IT

There are many occasions on which we recall the past—for momentary amusement only. On other occasions the active renewal of old friendships begin when "strictly by chance" we meet and recall mutual experiences as "fond memories." WWII veterans have often expressed amazement at what they remember when they meet at reunions and discuss their mutual participation in past

events. Occasionally, feelings other than friendship are aroused at reunions and other gatherings of relatives, friends, colleagues, or classmates.

Efforts in 1961-1965 to commemorate the American Civil War were frustrated because personal and collective memories (unrelated to the war) of some participants were in conflict at the time. In other words, the years 1961-1965 were fraught with contemporary issues and problems that did not give cause for celebration—and the 1960s was not the time to commemorate (with national pride) events evoking bitter memories.

In 1991-1995 the 50th anniversary of World War II could be observed with an appropriate emphasis on "national memories"—and with a remarkable touch of irony in the election of the first non-veteran president since 1944. By 1945, our "national memories" were in bitter conflict about how the war in the Pacific was ended. The wisdom, necessity, and morality of destroying Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs proved to be undebatable fifty years after the event. The clash of collective memories between a younger generation and older participants "who were there" became a shameful misunderstanding as to the difference between "what happened" and "what should not have happened." *Books and articles on "The History Wars" were written with a stronger reliance on the authors' preferences than on personal, collective, or national memories.*

Considering the possibility that "recalling events of WWII" can be provocative—and should not be debated at the wrong time or in the wrong place—the probability of continuing "generation gaps" in the 21st century is appreciable. And given the ease with which home computers facilitate the "re-writing of national, state, and local histories," it is wise not to emphasize that the past is what we make it. In our current culturally diverse and highly pluralistic society, there is no easy way to specify who the pronoun *we* includes.

And yet, our comprehension and understanding of all forms of history fall short when we study and learn history but remain ignorant of any use to which we can put our historical facts and findings. In similar fashion, an obsession with personal identity history (that may become a national pastime) can be a detriment to the "self-discovery" that so many seek. There are severe limits to what we can make of our ancestral past—and almost nothing we can do to pass our discovery of self along to anyone whose personal and collective memories are elsewhere.

What we can make of the past is an interesting and useful means of learning more about the present and preparing for contingencies in the future. In any event, what we make of the past is directly dependent upon how we recall past events and experiences—and the uses to which we put what we recall. *Neither the human mind nor the past is a blank slate upon which human experience writes.*

RECALLING THE 20TH CENTURY

If the past is what we remember, all around us, where we find it, and what we make it—we can indeed learn much about our present and our future by learning from the 20th century. With all its faults as "chart and compass," the recent past is still the best guide that most of us have in understanding the present and preparing for the future. And to an appreciable extent, it is quite plausible that all of us can learn a great deal *about* the present by learning *from* the past.

To learn from the 20th century we should seek more imaginative ways of recalling our memories of significant events that are linked to other events of interest and value. In learning from our observation of change within our respective environments, we should regard such efforts as a personal challenge to analyze, interpret, and explain the changes observed within our own lifetimes—and in the process, we should seek ways in which to improve our efforts to visualize and verbalize our observations for the benefit of others. *In all of us, perhaps, there is an impulse to teach and inform others about our experiences in learning what we know.*

In our respective searches for mementos, facts, artifacts, and lasting impressions of the past, we should learn more effective means of interpreting what we have learned about the past and how we have learned it. And with respect to our uses of the past, each of us should learn that reflection often takes time, patience, and concentration. The simile of "putting our thoughts on the back burner" is often good advice when ideas, concepts, principles, and plans need "time to simmer."

To recall and use the past in learning about the present, we must do so on the premise that what we learn is related to how we use personal and collective memories, the opportunities we have to observe present situations and conditions, and how we study, apply, and use what we recall. Implied by our efforts is the readiness to set priorities in evaluating the usefulness of what we find and study. If human memory is indeed selective and it is—so are our perceptions and observations, our efforts to seek or search, and the uses we make of past experiences.

As our recent past, the later decades of the 20th century will supply the majority of memories, observations, and useful findings for baby-boomers and their children. The post-WWII era will be recalled more readily by the parents of baby-boomers, and living veterans of WWII will continue (for a few more years) to recall the years of depression and wartime devastation. To recall the distal past of World War I and the first decade of the 20th century, those of us who "verbalize" the past will seek our findings from historians and other writers with distinctive credibility. Those of us who seek to "visualize" the early years will rely upon the drawings, paintings, photographs, and other recorded sights and sounds left by generations no longer living.

Clearly implied by any classification of decades or eras is the influence of generational differences in what is recalled and used for their collective present. Among the differences will be, of course, the "biased points-of-view" by which generations are often identified. All such points-of-view offer interesting possibilities for our understanding and appreciation of the 20th century.

For reasons not yet understood, "biased points-of-view" proliferated in the last two decades of the 20th century, and the excesses of radio and TV talk shows, political correctness, postmodernism, and public morals should provide interesting insights into 20th century "mentality"—*if and when* such excesses can be recalled with sufficient detachment and objectivity. Other candidates for candid review, interpretation, and explanation are the "tumultuous sixties" and the "ideological skirmishes" that followed. Perhaps never before in higher education have so many students and faculty members felt so intensely about issues of minor importance—*and "rationalized" so vehemently their rejection of rationality in public thought and discussion!*

Other past events with a "promising future" for reconsideration and impartial appraisal could be multi-culturalism, the clashes between technology and culture (instead of the sciences versus the humanities), the fads and fashions of "buzz words", the "INs" and "OUTs" of testing, measurement, assessment, and evaluation—and the periodic "On-again" and "Off-again" national concern with admissions, advanced placement, basic skills of literacy, accreditation, accountability, graduation requirements, and academic excellence. Closely related to such periodic concerns are the waves of reform, re-discovery, re-invention, or reconfiguration that sweep across the beaches of liberal, general, specialized, advanced, professional, graduate, and post-doctoral education.

For serious scholars with patience and commendable tolerance for frustration, there are many questions for which answers can be sought. For examples: Why have we not been more successful in teaching disadvantaged students to read and to write well enough to complete satisfactorily two years of postsecondary education?—Why have so many technological innovations failed to fulfill the high expectations with which they were introduced?—and How can we create and sustain an environment for learning in a sociocultural

context where the advantages and benefits of a college education are unclear to too many students? Recognizing that such a list could be extended indefinitely, we should be prepared for two eventual questions:

"Who owns the 20th century?" and *"What are the social, political, economic, and personal costs in obtaining the data, information, and knowledge we need to learn about our past as individuals, organized groups, and institutions?"*

In closing, we can confidently state that *if* we have learned *anything* from the 20th century, we can expect continuing innovations in information-processing, global communications, and the technological transfer of knowledge. In addition, we can expect that innovations in information technology will increase the efficiency with which knowledge is transferred—and extend the various uses of knowledge—*but without comparable concern for the quality and effectiveness of knowledge.* Also implicit in what we know about the 20th century is the likelihood that the distribution of knowledge will be increasingly competitive and result in misuses for which no individual, group, or organization can be held accountable. The social, cultural, and educational consequences of 20th century discoveries, inventions, and innovations give us an awesome incentive to learn about the past, to comprehend and use the knowledge we gain, and to understand that knowledge and wisdom are never inexpensive—but must be purchased with payment in kind.[3]

ENDNOTES

1. Hobsbawn, Eric. *On History.* New York: The New Press, 1997.

2. Fincher, Cameron. "Improving Institutional Memory." *Research in Higher Education,* 26(4), 1987.

3. Fincher, Cameron. "Perspectives and Insights: Historical, Comparative, and Developmental." *Research in Higher Education,* 39(6), 1998.

THIS ISSUE . . .

This issue of IHE PERSPECTIVES is a brief effort to look back on the 20th century as a fascinating opportunity to learn about the present by learning from the past. In the early years of a new decade in a new century, all of us will have a vested interest in the past century and in moving on to what will be a better future, we trust, there is much to be learned about ourselves, the recent past, and the immediate future.

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